



[Home](#) » [Under Secretary for Democracy and Global Affairs](#) » [Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor](#) » [Releases](#) » [International Religious Freedom](#) » [2010 Report on International Religious Freedom](#) » [Near East and North Africa](#) » [Egypt](#)

Egypt

BUREAU OF DEMOCRACY, HUMAN RIGHTS, AND LABOR

International Religious Freedom Report 2010

November 17, 2010

The constitution provides for freedom of belief and the practice of religious rites, although the government places restrictions on these rights in practice. Islam is the official state religion, and the principles of Shari'a (Islamic law) are the primary sources of legislation.

The status of respect for religious freedom by the government remained poor, unchanged from the previous year. Members of non-Muslim religious minorities officially recognized by the government generally worship without harassment; however, Christians and members of the Baha'i Faith, which the government does not recognize, face personal and collective discrimination, especially in government employment and their ability to build, renovate, and repair places of worship. The government also sometimes arrested, detained, and harassed Muslims such as Shi'a, Ahmadiyas, Quranists, converts from Islam to Christianity, and members of other religious groups whose beliefs and/or practices it deemed to deviate from mainstream Islamic beliefs and whose activities it alleged to jeopardize communal harmony. Government authorities often refused to provide converts with new identity documents indicating their chosen faith. The government failed to prosecute perpetrators of violence against Coptic Christians in a number of cases, including in Baghoura, Farshout, and Marsa Matruh. Despite statements from President Mubarak and other senior government officials condemning sectarian incitement and violence, on November 24, 2009, the governor of Minya publicly denied any sectarian violence occurred in his governorate although such incidents were documented. The government again failed to redress laws--particularly laws relating to church construction and renovation--and governmental practices, especially government hiring, that discriminate against Christians, effectively allowing their discriminatory effects and their modeling effect on society to become further entrenched. The government continued to sponsor informal reconciliation sessions following sectarian attacks. This practice generally prevented the criminal prosecution of perpetrators of crimes against Copts, precluded their recourse to the judicial system for restitution, and contributed to a climate of impunity that encouraged further assaults. In positive steps, the government issued identification documents to some unmarried members of the Baha'i community; it arrested and began prosecuting four alleged perpetrators of a sectarian attack against Copts in Naga Hammadi; and a court in Qena sentenced five Muslims to life imprisonment for murdering two Christians.

There continued to be religious discrimination and sectarian tension in society during the period covered by this report, and some religious groups and activists reported an increase in sectarian tensions. For example, on January 6, 2010, in

the city of Naga Hammadi, six Copts and one Muslim were killed in an attack on worshippers following Coptic Christmas Mass.

The ambassador, senior administration officials, and members of Congress continued to raise U.S. concerns about religious discrimination with senior government officials and directly with the public. Specifically, embassy officers and other U.S. Department of State officials raised concerns with the government about ongoing discrimination that Christians face in building and maintaining church properties, sectarian violence, the government's use of informal reconciliation instead of criminal prosecutions, and the state's treatment of Muslim citizens who hold heterodox beliefs or convert to other religions.

Section I. Religious Demography

The country has an area of 370,308 square miles and a population of 86 million, almost 90 percent of whom are Sunni Muslims. Shi'a Muslims constitute significantly less than 1 percent of the population. Estimates of the percentage of Christians range from 8 to 12 percent (6 to 10 million), the majority belonging to the Coptic Orthodox Church. The country's Jewish community numbers approximately 125 persons, mostly senior citizens.

Other Christian communities include the Armenian Apostolic, Catholic (Armenian, Chaldean, Greek, Melkite, Roman, and Syrian Catholic), Maronite, and Orthodox (Greek and Syrian) churches that range in size from several thousand to hundreds of thousands. A Protestant (known in Arabic as "ingili," meaning evangelical) community, established in the mid-19th century, includes 16 Protestant denominations (Presbyterian, Anglican, Baptist, Brethren, Open Brethren, Revival of Holiness (Nahdat al-Qadaasa), Faith (Al-Eyman), Church of God, Christian Model Church (Al-Mithaal Al-Masihi), Apostolic, Grace (An-Ni'ma), Pentecostal, Apostolic Grace, Church of Christ, Gospel Missionary (Al-Kiraaza bil Ingil), and the Message Church of Holland (Ar-Risaala). There are also followers of the Seventh-day Adventist Church, which was granted legal status in the 1960s. There are 800 to 1,200 Jehovah's Witnesses and small numbers of Mormons, but the government does not recognize either group. The number of Baha'is is estimated at 2,000 persons.

Christians reside throughout the country, although the percentage of Christians is higher in Upper Egypt (the southern part of the country) and in some sections of Cairo and Alexandria.

There are many foreign religious groups, especially Roman Catholics and Protestants, who have had a presence in the country for more than a century. These groups engage in education, social, and development work.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal/Policy Framework

The constitution, under article 46, provides for freedom of belief and the practice of religious rites; however, the government restricts these rights in practice. Islam is the official state religion, and Islamic law is the principal source of legislation. A January 2008 lower court ruling interpreted the constitution's guarantee of religious freedom as inapplicable to Muslim citizens who wish to convert to another religion. This ruling, which is not binding in other courts, remained under appeal at the end of the reporting period, although on April 27, 2010, an appellate court announced that it would not decide the appeal until the Supreme Constitutional Court ruled on a series of cases related to article 46. Courts ruled in previous years that the constitution's guarantee of freedom of religion does not apply to Baha'is.

In its January 2008 decision in the case of Muhammad Ahmad Abduh Higazy v. the Minister of Interior et al., the Cairo Administrative Court noted that the country ratified the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, of which article 18 provides for absolute freedom of religion, with a reservation, namely that the covenant shall be ratified to the extent that it does not conflict with Islamic law.

Although there are no statutory prohibitions on conversion, the government does not recognize conversions of Muslims to Christianity or other religions, and resistance to such conversions by local officials--through refusal to recognize conversions legally--constitutes a prohibition in practice. The security services reportedly maintain regular and sometimes hostile surveillance of Muslim-born citizens who are suspected of having converted to Christianity. Moreover, in January 2008 the Cairo Administrative Court, a court of first impression, ruled that freedom to convert does not extend to Muslim citizens. It stated that the freedom to practice religious rites is subject to limits, especially the maintenance of public order, public morals, and conformity to the provisions and principles of Islam, which forbid Muslims to convert. The court stated that "public order" is defined as the official religion being Islam, that most of the population professes Islam, and that Islamic law is the primary source of legislation. The ruling remained under appeal at the end of the reporting period. The Cairo Administrative Court ruled in June 2009 to deny Maher al-Gohary, another Muslim-born convert to Christianity, an identity document indicating his conversion to Christianity.

While there is no legal ban on proselytizing Muslims, the government restricts such efforts. Neither the constitution nor the civil and penal codes prohibit proselytizing, but police have detained or otherwise harassed those accused of proselytizing on charges of ridiculing or insulting heavenly religions or inciting sectarian strife. The government generally tolerates foreign religious workers on condition that they do not proselytize Muslims. Over the past 15 years the government has refused reentry, denied residency renewal requests, or expelled expatriates they suspected of engaging in unapproved religious activities.

The application of family law, including marriage, divorce, alimony, child custody, and burial, is based on an individual's religion. In the practice of family law, the government recognizes only the three "heavenly religions," Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. Muslim families are subject to Islamic law, Christian families to canon law, and Jewish families to Jewish law. In cases of family law disputes involving a marriage between a Christian woman and a Muslim man, the courts apply Islamic law. The government does not recognize the marriages of citizens adhering to religions other than Christianity, Judaism, or Islam.

Under Islamic law as practiced in the country, Muslim women are prohibited from marrying non-Muslim men. A non-Muslim male must therefore convert to Islam to marry Muslim women, although non-Muslim women need not convert to marry Muslim men. Also, a non-Muslim wife who converts to Islam must divorce her non-Muslim husband. In some cases, upon the wife's conversion, local security authorities reportedly ask the non-Muslim husband if he is willing to convert to Islam; if he chooses not to, divorce proceedings may begin immediately and custody of children is awarded to the mother.

Inheritance laws for all citizens are based on the government's interpretation of Islamic law. Muslim female heirs receive half the amount of a male heir's inheritance. Christian widows of Muslims have no automatic inheritance rights but may be provided for in testamentary documents.

Under Islamic law, converts from Islam lose all rights of inheritance. Because the government offers no legal means for converts from Islam to Christianity to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status, the converts' loss of inheritance rights may not be indicated on civil documents.

In the absence of legal means to register their change in religious status, some converts resort to soliciting illicit identity papers, often by submitting fraudulent supporting documents or bribing government clerks who process the documents. Authorities periodically detain and charge converts and those assisting them in violating laws that prohibit the falsification of documents.

The law prescribes administrative steps pursuant to the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam. The minor children of such converts, and in some cases adult children who were minors when their parents converted, may automatically become

classified as Muslims by the government irrespective of the religion of the other parent. This practice is in accordance with the government's interpretation of Islamic law, which dictates "no jurisdiction of a non-Muslim over a Muslim."

Civil statutes and religious laws, both Islamic and Coptic, prevent Coptic men from marrying Muslim women. When a male Christian and a female Muslim marry outside the country, their marriage is not legally recognized in the country. Additionally, the woman could be arrested and charged with apostasy, and any children from such a marriage could be taken and assigned to the physical custody of a male Muslim guardian, as determined by the government's interpretation of Islamic law.

The law provides for "khul'" divorce, which allows a Muslim woman to obtain a divorce without her husband's consent, provided that she is willing to forego all of her financial rights, including alimony, dowry, and other benefits. Many women have complained that after being granted khul', the required child support is not paid.

In May 2010 the Supreme Administrative Court ruled that the Coptic Orthodox Church must permit divorced adherents to remarry, a ruling the Coptic Orthodox Church characterized as an infringement on its authority. According to government policy and previous practice, the application of family law, including marriage and divorce, is based on an individual's religion, whereby Orthodox Copts are subject to Coptic Orthodox Church law. The Coptic Orthodox Church permits divorce only in cases of adultery or the conversion of one spouse to another religion, or to another Christian denomination.

The Ministry of Education bans wearing the hijab (Islamic head scarf) in primary schools and allows it only in preparatory and secondary schools upon written request from a girl's parent.

The government observes Eid Al-Fitr, Eid Al-Adha, the Islamic New Year, Mawlid al-Nabi (the birth of the Prophet Muhammad), and Coptic Christmas (January 7) as national holidays.

Constitutional amendments approved by referendum in 2007 have unclear implications for religious freedom. The amended article 1 of the constitution states that the country's political system is based on the principle of citizenship. The amended article 5 prohibits the formation of political parties or the conduct of political activities on a religious basis. Government supporters argued that these changes would separate religion from politics. Some critics, including the opposition Muslim Brotherhood, argued that the amendments are incompatible with article 2, which states that the principles of Islamic law are the primary source for legislation.

Various ministries are legally authorized to ban or confiscate books and works of art upon obtaining a court order. The Council of Ministers may order the banning of works it deems offensive to public morals, detrimental to religion, or likely to cause a breach of the peace. The Islamic Research Center (IRC) of Al-Azhar has the legal authority to censor and, since 2004, to confiscate any publications dealing with the Qur'an and the authoritative Islamic traditions (Hadith). A 2003 Ministry of Justice decree authorizes Al-Azhar to confiscate publications, tapes, speeches, and artistic materials deemed inconsistent with Islamic law. There were no reports of the exercise of this authority during the reporting period.

In 2008 the Cairo Administrative Court ruled that the government must issue new identity cards and birth certificates to 13 Christian-born converts to Islam (some whose purpose was to avoid Coptic Church restrictions on divorce) who converted back to Christianity; the documents must indicate that the holder is Christian and "previously embraced Islam." The court held the "recording of a conversion" from Islam to Christianity in the personal identity card does not "establish" the apostasy of the card holder. However, it held that failure to convey the holder's apostasy would conflict with public order, implying that identifying apostates serves as a warning mechanism to the society at large. The nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) Human Rights Watch and the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights warned the government that any such public reference could subject converts to social stigma and discrimination. The government has taken no action to implement the order. In 2009 it stated that it was awaiting a Supreme Constitutional Court decision on more than 100

cases filed by other "reconverts," and by several nongovernmental entities that oppose the ruling, contending that article two of the constitution, which states that Islamic law is the primary source of legislation, denies Muslims the right to convert from Islam.

On March 30, 2010, the Alexandria Administrative Court dismissed a lawsuit filed on behalf of two boys born as Coptic Christians seeking recognition of their self-identification as Christian, despite their father's conversion to Islam in 2005. As a result, when the plaintiffs turned 16 in June 2010, they were only eligible to receive national identification cards designating that they are "Muslim." The court's dismissal of the lawsuit supported the discriminatory policy of forcibly changing the religious affiliation of children recorded on official documents when their father converts to Islam, even when the Christian mother retains custody. The court that day also dismissed a lawsuit filed to compel the government to identify the boys as "Christian" on official identity documents, ruling that Coptic Church-issued documents certifying that the boys were Christian had no legal standing.

All mosques must be licensed by the Ministry of Islamic Endowments (Awqaf). The government appoints and pays the salaries of the imams who lead prayers in mosques and monitors their sermons. It does not contribute to the funding of Christian churches. The Ministry of Islamic Endowments reported that there were 104,506 mosques and small dedicated prayer areas called "zawayas" nationwide as of April 2010. A 2004 decree by the minister of Islamic endowments removed from governors the authority to issue permits to build mosques and placed private mosques under the ministry's administrative control; however, up to 20,000 mosques and zawayas may remain unsupervised by the ministry.

The contemporary interpretation of the 1856 Ottoman Hamayouni decree, still partially in force, requires non-Muslims to obtain a presidential decree to build new churches and synagogues. In addition, Ministry of Interior (MOI) regulations, issued in 1934 under the Al-Ezabi decree, specify a set of 10 conditions that the government must consider before a presidential decree for construction of a new non-Muslim place of worship can be issued. The conditions include the requirement that the distance that a church may be no closer than 100 meters (340 feet) from a mosque and that approval of the neighboring Muslim community must be obtained before a permit to build a new church may be issued.

In 2005 the president issued Decree 291/2005, which delegated authority to the country's 26 governors to grant permits to Christian denominations that seek to expand or rebuild existing churches. The decree also stated that churches could undertake basic repairs and maintenance subject only to the provision of written notification to local authorities. Decree 291 noted that governors must examine all applications for rebuilding or expansion, which must be supported by unspecified documents, within 30 days of submission. According to the decree, "permits may not be refused except with a justified ruling." Decree 291 also cancelled a 1999 decree aimed at improving the permit process for church repair. (Presidential Decree 453 of 1999 had made the repair of all places of worship subject to a 1976 civil construction code. Although this decree made mosque and church repairs technically subject to the same laws, authorities enforced the laws more strictly for churches.)

In April 2009 the Cairo Administrative Court rejected a legal challenge to Decree 291/2005. The lawyer who raised the challenge sought to invalidate the decree because he did not believe the Ottoman-era Hamayouni decree gave the president the power to delegate repair or renovation authority to governors. The court ruled that "enlightened Islamic thinking accepts the presence of non-Muslims as part and parcel of one nation, where they can practice their beliefs freely and safely within the frame of public order, which regulates relations among individuals as well as their relations with the state."

Some communities, faced with refusal of their requests for permits, use private buildings and apartments for religious services or build without permits. Local authorities sometimes close down such unlicensed places of worship.

For a religious group to be officially recognized, it must submit a request to the MOI's Religious Affairs Department, which determines whether the group would, in its view, pose a threat or upset national unity or social peace. The department also consults leading religious figures, particularly the pope of the Coptic Orthodox Church and the sheikh of Al-Azhar. The registration is then referred to the president, who, if he concurs, issues a decree recognizing the new group, according to Law 15 of 1927. If a religious group bypasses the official registration process, participants are potentially subject to detention and could also face prosecution and punishment under article 98(F) of the penal code, which forbids the "denigration of religions." There were, however, no reports of the government prosecuting unregistered religious groups under these provisions. The government last recognized a new religious group in 1990.

Government authorities sometimes fail to uphold the law in sensitive conversion cases. Prior to this reporting period, local authorities sometimes allowed custody of a minor Christian female who converts to Islam to be transferred to a Muslim custodian, who is likely to grant approval for a marriage opposed by the girl's Christian parents. The government's past Instructions for Notaries Public, which implement Law 114 of 1947, stated that persons age 16 and older may convert to Islam without parental consent. This most often occurred when a 16 or 17 year old girl married a Muslim man. However, the 2010 Child Law prohibits marriage under the age of 18.

Law 263 of 1960, still in force, bans Baha'i institutions and community activities and strips Baha'is of legal recognition. Despite the ban, they are able to engage in community activities such as Naw-Ruz, the Baha'i new year's celebration. During the Nasser era, the government confiscated all Baha'i community properties, including Baha'i centers, libraries, and cemeteries.

The government requires all citizens to be categorized as Muslims, Christians, or Jews on national identity cards. The MOI has, on rare occasions, reportedly issued documents that list a citizen's religion as "other," or that do not mention religion; however, it is not clear when these conditions apply. Baha'is and other religious groups not associated with any of the three recognized religions have been compelled either to misrepresent themselves or to live without valid identity documents.

In 2008 the Cairo Administrative Court ruled in three cases brought by Baha'is that the government must issue official identification documents containing a dash or other mark in the religion field. The court noted that a purpose of filling the religion field with a dash or other distinctive mark was to protect members of the "revealed religions" (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) from Baha'i infiltration and to avoid potential dangers from such persons' conduct and relations with them. The ruling stated that anyone who adopts the Baha'i Faith is an apostate and that the religion cannot be recorded in any civil status or other official document, because that would conflict with public order. But in April 2009 the MOI issued Decree 520 describing procedures for members of unrecognized religious groups to obtain national identity cards with dashes in the religious identification field. According to Baha'i community members, throughout the first half of 2010 the government implemented the order and reportedly issued more than 180 birth certificates and 50 to 60 national identification cards to Baha'is, all with dashes in the religious identification field. The government, because it does not recognize Baha'i marriage, and there is no civil mechanism for marriage, refused to issue identification documents to married Baha'is, unless they would agree to specify their marital status as "unmarried." According to the government, it was attempting to find a mechanism to issue identification documents to married Baha'is that would correctly identify marital status.

Those without valid identity cards also encounter difficulty registering their children in school, opening bank accounts, and establishing businesses. Police occasionally conduct random inspections of identity papers and those found without identity cards can be detained until they produce the document.

The government has not granted legal recognition to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS), or Mormons, in Cairo. The LDS Church has maintained an organized congregation in the country for more than 30 years. The government has raised no objection.

The government banned Jehovah's Witnesses in 1960. Since then it has, to varying degrees, subjected them to harassment and surveillance. The Jehovah's Witnesses were legally registered in Cairo in 1951 and Alexandria in 1956, and their presence in the country dates to the 1930s. The government attributes its refusal to grant the registration to the Jehovah's Witnesses to the opposition of the Coptic Orthodox Church, which has condemned the group as heretical, as well as to its lingering Nasser-era suspicion of links between the Jehovah's Witnesses and the State of Israel.

In 1954 the government outlawed the Muslim Brotherhood, an Islamist party that operates missionary, charitable, and political activities, regarding it as a threat to National Democratic Party (NDP) rule, but has tolerated its operations with varying levels of interference. Muslim Brothers speak openly and publicly about their views and identify themselves as members of the organization, although they remain subject to arbitrary detention and pressure from the government.

The government at times prosecutes and otherwise harasses, including through detentions and the imposition of travel bans, members of religious groups whose practices are deemed to deviate from mainstream Islamic beliefs and whose activities are alleged to jeopardize communal harmony.

The government has advised journalists and cartoonists to avoid anti-Semitism. Government officials insist that anti-Semitic statements in the media are a reaction to Israeli government actions against Palestinians and do not reflect historical anti-Semitism; however, there are few public attempts to distinguish between anti-Semitism and anti-Israeli sentiment.

The quasi-governmental National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) is charged with furthering protections, raising awareness, and ensuring the observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms, including religious freedom. It is also charged with monitoring enforcement and application of international agreements. Five of its 25 appointed members are Christians.

Local media, including state television and radio, regularly include Islamic programming. Christian television programs are shown weekly on state-owned Nile Cultural TV.

Restrictions on Religious Freedom

Church and human rights leaders reported that, five years after the promulgation of Decree 291/2005, many local officials continued to intentionally delay the process for obtaining permits to repair, rebuild, or expand existing churches. They charged that some local authorities refused to process applications without "supporting documents" that are virtually impossible to obtain (e.g., a presidential decree authorizing the existence of a church that had been established during the country's monarchical era). Others complained that some local authorities categorized routine repairs and maintenance (e.g., painting and plumbing repairs) as expansion/reconstruction projects that require formal permits rather than simple notification. They also maintained that security forces blocked them from using permits that have been issued and denied them permits for repairs to church buildings. Such practices depended primarily on the attitudes of local security officials and the governorate leadership toward the church, and on their personal relationships with church representatives. As a result, congregations experienced lengthy delays, years in many cases, while waiting for new building permits.

The government continued to detain, harass, and deny civil documents, including national identity cards, birth certificates, and marriage licenses, to citizens who convert from Islam to Christianity.

During the reporting period, the government refused the Jehovah's Witnesses' continued efforts to be granted legal registration. In January 2010 the Cairo Administrative Court dismissed a lawsuit filed by the Jehovah's Witnesses to compel the government to recognize it as a Christian denomination. In its decision the court cited a 2005 statement by the Coptic Orthodox Church denying that Jehovah's Witnesses are Christians.

Some communities, faced with refusal of their requests for permits, used private buildings and apartments for religious services or built without permits. Local authorities sometimes closed down such unlicensed places of worship.

While the government complied with court rulings by issuing identity documents with a "dash" for religion to unmarried Baha'i, it continued to refuse to issue marriage certificates. This made it impossible for married members of the Baha'i community to obtain identity documents recognizing their marital status. The government cited its nonrecognition of the Baha'i Faith and the country's lack of a civil marriage mechanism as reasons for the denial.

During the reporting period, the approval process for church construction continued to be hindered by lengthy delays, often measured in years. Although government officials maintained that the president approved all requests for permits presented to him, independent critics charged that delays by the MOI and/or local authorities caused many requests to reach the president slowly or not at all. Some churches complained that local security officials blocked church repairs or improvements even when a permit had been issued. Others suggested unequal enforcement of the regulations pertaining to church and mosque projects. Many churches faced difficulty in obtaining permits from provincial officials.

According to statistics published in the *Official Gazette*, the president issued 16 decrees authorizing construction of 12 Protestant churches and four Coptic churches during the reporting period (all in Upper Egypt except one: eight in Minya, six in Assuit, one in Beni Suef, and one in Ismailia). No statistics were available on the number of permit requests made. In its comments before the UN Human Rights Council on February 16, 2010, the government asserted that it had approved construction of 138 new churches and renovation of 527 others since 2005.

Local government officials have refused to issue a building permit for a new church in the Arbaeen District of Assiut for 13 years, despite a 1997 order from the president and approval from the MOI to issue the permit. The president issued decrees allowing the Coptic Orthodox churches in Assiut's El Hamra District and Burg al Arab, Alexandria Governorate, to construct new churches, but they have been waiting for construction permits to be issued since 1997 and 1988, respectively.

Local government officials in Assiut Governorate revoked a license to reconstruct the church belonging to the Church of the Brethren shortly after the license was granted in 2001, and construction has been halted for the past nine years. Church representatives reportedly began the application process in 1997, intending to replace their church building, the dilapidated condition of which posed safety hazards. Local police reportedly halted construction after the old building was razed in preparation for constructing the new one.

The MOI continued to prevent renovation of St. John the Baptist Church at Awlad Elias in Sadfa, near Assiut, which began nine years ago. At the end of the reporting period, the congregation continued to meet for worship in a tent erected in the small courtyard of the church. The governor of Assiut issued a decree for a permit to undertake renovations in 1999 that was renegotiated with State Security in 2001 to allow for enlargement. Church representatives initiated their request for a renovation permit in 1999.

Governmental authorities blocked renovation of other churches as well, including the Church of Mar Mina near Beni Suef, and the Archangel Mikhail Coptic Church in Ezbet al-Nakhl.

The courts did not rule on the March 2008 appeal of legal counsel for Muhammad Ahmad Abduh Higazy against the January 2008 ruling of the Cairo Administrative Court that the administrative agency of the Civil Status Department was not bound to examine his client's request to have his new religious affiliation, Christianity, recorded on his national identity card. In its ruling the court wrote that principles of Islamic law forbid Muslims from converting from Islam and such conversion would constitute a disparagement of the official state religion and an enticement for other Muslims to convert. The court asserted its duty to "protect public order from the crime of apostasy from Islam and to protect public morals, especially if the apostate petitions the administration to condone his misdeed and his corrupt caprice." In 2007 Mohamed Ahmed Higazy and his wife Zeinab had publicly announced that they had converted to Christianity and wished to be legally recognized as such. The ruling maintained a government policy not to provide a legal means for converts from Islam to Christianity to amend their civil records to reflect their new religious status.

On June 13, 2009, the Seventh Circuit Court of Administrative Justice ruled against Maher al-Gohary, a Muslim convert to Christianity who filed suit in 2008 seeking government recognition of his conversion, including by changing the required religion space on his national identity card to indicate "Christian." The court stated that al-Gohary had demonstrated behavior that contradicted his claim to be a Christian, thereby toying with religion. The court stated that the constitution's guarantee of freedom of belief, including freedom to embrace a different religion, is an internal matter and not subject to restrictions. It held, however, that the constitutional guarantee of freedom to practice religious rites is subject to restrictions that may be imposed through regulations that emphasize certain higher interests, especially those related to safeguarding public order and moral values and to protecting the rights and freedoms of others. The court also stated that the country is a state not solely governed by civil law and that it had approved the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, with its religious freedom guarantees, "taking into consideration the provisions of Islamic Law and the absence of contradiction between these provisions and the Covenant," which means that in the event of a contradiction, Islamic law takes precedence. The court also stated that there is no law authorizing the Coptic Church to certify a citizen's change of religion from Islam to Christianity. Accordingly, the court found that there are legislative shortcomings that constitute a failure to achieve effective protection for freedom of religion and effectively prevent manipulation of religion for personal gain. As a result, the court recommended that parliament rectify this deficiency. In May 2009 the State Council, a consultative body of the country's Administrative Court, sent a report to the judge expressing opposition to al-Gohary's request to change the religious designation on his identity card and claimed that the case is a threat to societal order and that it violates Islamic law. At the end of the reporting period, the verdict remained under appeal.

On September 17, 2009, al-Gohary attempted to leave the country. Government authorities at Cairo International Airport refused to permit him to board an airplane bound for a foreign destination and confiscated his passport. It was unclear if authorities had a legal basis for taking the passport or refusing to issue a replacement. Al-Gohary filed suit against the MOI challenging the ban, a case that remained pending at the close of the reporting period.

On June 1, 2010, Luxor International Airport authorities reportedly confiscated 300 books from a Christian from Sohag Governorate. The individual was allowed to depart to Kuwait without the books.

On May 24, 2010, Alexandria's Prosecution Office released 12 young persons associated with an evangelical church, who had been held in detention for two days after being accused of distributing evangelistic books and pamphlets.

On February 15, 2010, a U.S. citizen accused of evangelizing in Egypt was reportedly arrested upon his arrival to Cairo International Airport and deported overnight. According to local contacts and press reports, the man had previously been accused of evangelizing in residential areas in Egypt.

On September 23, 2009, police officers reportedly arrested Abd al-Masih Kamel Barsoum, who is associated with an evangelical church in Minya, while he was distributing Christian religious materials in downtown Cairo. Barsoum was taken

to the Qasr al-Nil police station and charged with not carrying an identity card. The Prosecutor's Office ordered his release, although he was first transferred to Minya and again questioned there by authorities.

In recent years there were reports that the government harassed Christian clergy and other Christian leaders at the international airport in Cairo, confiscating address books, written materials, and various forms of recordable media while they passed through customs to board flights.

Anti-Semitic sentiments appeared in both the government-owned and opposition press; however, there have been no violent anti-Semitic incidents in recent years.

Anti-Semitic articles and opinion pieces appeared in the print media, and editorial cartoons in the press and electronic media. Anti-Semitic editorial cartoons and articles depicting demonic images of Israeli leaders, stereotypical images of Jews and Jewish symbols that generally referenced Israel or Zionism, and comparisons of Israeli leaders to Hitler and the Nazis were published throughout the reporting period.

There were no reports during the reporting period of authors facing trial or charges related to writings or statements considered heretical.

In November 2009 the Al Azhar's fatwa issuing body, the Islamic Research Academy, published and circulated a pamphlet entitled *The Scientific Report* by Mohamed Emara. The pamphlet was purportedly a response to a book published by a Copt allegedly denigrating Islam. Coptic activists immediately criticized the pamphlet, as did independent and government-controlled newspapers. In early January the IRC secretary general announced that *The Scientific Report* had been withdrawn and was henceforth "banned."

Two private lawsuits remained pending against author Nawal Al-Sadawi at the end of the reporting period, after the IRC criticized her play, "God Submits His Resignation at the Summit," as disrespectful to Islam. Al Sadawi returned to the country during the reporting period.

The constitution provides for equal public rights and duties without discrimination based on religion or creed; however, the government discriminates against non-Muslims.

As of June 30, 2010, there were six Christians (five appointed, one elected) in the 454-seat People's Assembly; six Christians (all appointed) in the 264-seat Shura Council; two in the 32-member cabinet; and one governor of the country's 28 was Christian. There were few Christians in the upper ranks of the security services and armed forces. Public funds compensate Muslim imams but not Christian clergy.

The government rarely nominates Copts to run in elections as NDP candidates. Out of 92 candidates put forward by the NDP to run in the June 1 Shura Council election, 3 were Copts. The president also typically designates 4-7 additional Christians to appointed seats. Christians, who represent between 8 and 12 percent of the population, hold fewer than 2 percent of the seats in the People's Assembly and Shura Council.

There were no Christians serving as presidents or deans of the country's 17 public universities. Of nearly 700 president, dean, or vice dean positions in the country's public university system, only one or two positions were filled by Christians.

The government discriminates against Christians in public sector hiring and staff appointments to public universities, and bars them from studying at Al-Azhar University, a publicly funded institution with approximately half a million students. In general, the government bars non-Muslims from employment in public university training programs for Arabic language teachers because the curriculum involves study of the Qur'an.

On May 31, 2010, the Supreme Administrative Court upheld a lower court ruling requiring the Coptic Church to allow remarriage following a civil court divorce order. The Coptic Church stated it would not comply because it considered the ruling government interference with its religious authority.

The 2009-10 National Council for Human Rights (NCHR) annual report highlighted increased sectarian tension and restrictions on Shi'as while at the same time noting a "relative breakthrough" in issuing identity documents to Baha'is. Following communal violence, NCHR noted that authorities used a "combination of customary procedure, reconciliation and mitigation, along with the legal procedures of detention, referral to the public prosecution...." An NCHR Mission investigating one case of communal violence recommended "penalizing the aggressor in the incident [because] reconciliation meetings were futile if they provide impunity for the aggressor." However, unlike in previous years, the 2009-10 annual report did not provide recommendations on religious freedom or any other area to the government.

Abuses of Religious Freedom

Authorities refused to grant an identity document to a convert from Islam to Christianity that indicated her new religion as Christian and detained her when she was found to possess numerous counterfeit documents that identified her as a Christian. Authorities reportedly subjected her to physical abuse.

The Ministry of Interior failed, as of the end of the reporting period, to comply with repeated court orders to release Emad Adib Atiya Suleiman, a Christian married to a convert to Christianity, from "administrative detention." The courts, including a 2008 ruling by the Supreme State Security Emergency Court, have issued 15 orders to revoke a 2007 detention order for Suleiman that was based on "a romantic relationship between the aforementioned and a Muslim woman living in the same area." Suleiman remained in detention at the end of the reporting period.

The government continued to sponsor "reconciliation sessions" following sectarian attacks instead of prosecuting perpetrators of crimes against Copts. However, in positive steps during the reporting period the government arrested and tried the accused perpetrators of a sectarian attack in Deyrout, began prosecuting four alleged perpetrators for a sectarian attack in Naga Hamadi, and a court in Qena sentenced five men to life in prison for murdering two Christians in 2009. "Reconciliation sessions" generally precluded recourse to the judicial system for restitution. As an example, following an attack on a Coptic Church facility in the Mediterranean coastal city of Marsa Matruh on March 13, 2010, 30 attackers were arrested, but no criminal charges were filed. The government instead organized a reconciliation session. According to credible reports, the attack resulted in injuries to 19 Christians, four Muslims, and eight policemen who attempted to intervene. The Andalus Institute for Tolerance and Anti-Violence Studies carried out an investigation and reported that the attack resulted in the destruction of only Coptic-owned properties including 9 homes, 3 workshops, a warehouse, and 11 automobiles. The institute and press reports indicated that the incident was settled through cash payments to some victims who suffered property damage, and the Coptic Church agreed to demolish the wall that blocked an access route to the neighboring mosque. Some reports indicated that the wall was built on recently acquired Copt property. The attack was reportedly encouraged by the imam of that mosque who, like most imams in the country, receives a salary from the Ministry of Islamic Endowments. The imam reportedly incited a crowd estimated in the low hundreds. According to the institute report, the attack lasted three hours; fire trucks and ambulances arrived four hours after the attack began, and security forces, although located nearby, responded after two hours. The institute report credited security forces with extinguishing the fires and preventing carnage. Victims reportedly alleged that homes were looted before being set on fire.

During the reporting period, the government did not investigate or prosecute the perpetrators of a March 2009 attack on the homes of seven Baha'i families in the village of al-Shuraniya in Sohag Governorate. Muslim villagers, some of them related to the Baha'i villagers, attacked Baha'i houses with bricks and rocks until police dispersed them. On March 31, the attacks escalated when attackers returned and set fire to the homes, forcing the Baha'is to flee.

Although there are no legal restrictions on the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam, there were occasional reports that police persecuted converts from Islam to Christianity.

Until recently, many government officials denied the existence of sectarian violence or tension, which has contributed to a culture of impunity. On November 24, 2009, the governor of Minya reportedly denied to *Al-Watani Al-Youm* newspaper, the mouthpiece of the ruling NDP, any instances of sectarian violence in his governorate, whereas an investigative report by the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR), a reputable NGO, found that 21 such incidents occurred in Minya from January 2008 to January 2010, the highest percentage of all governorates in the country. According to the EIPR report, there was an instance of sectarian violence on average every 35 days in 17 different villages located in seven of the governorate's nine districts during that two year period.

The government continued to harass citizens for unorthodox religious beliefs. Beginning in Spring 2009, government security forces arrested 200-300 Shi'as. On July 2, 2009, they detained prominent Shi'a cleric Hassan Shehata on charges of forming an organization for the purpose of propagating Shi'ite ideas that disparage Islam and Sunni confessions. Most of those arrested were released by fall 2009, and Shehata was released in March 2010. However, as of the end of the reporting period, eight Shi'as were still being detained. The MOI has repeatedly renewed the detention orders, despite release orders from the Supreme State Security Court.

In September 2009 Cairo International Airport security officials prevented convert from Islam to Christianity Maher al-Gohary from leaving the country with his daughter. Security officials also seized his passport. At the end of the reporting period it remained unclear if authorities had a legal basis for taking the passport or refusing to issue a replacement.

In October 2009 a criminal court convicted Einas Refaat Mohamed Hassan, a convert from Islam to Christianity, of forgery for possessing a forged national identity card indicating her religion was Christianity. At the end of the reporting period, Hassan was serving a one-year prison sentence.

In July 2009 police in Mansoura arrested a Coptic Christian woman, while she was applying for birth certificates for her two children, on charges of possessing false documents. The police contended that her father's conversion to Islam years earlier resulted in her involuntary conversion to Islam. She was released after questioning and not charged.

In June, 2009, state security and police forces reportedly instigated a sectarian clash in Boshra, near Beni Suef, when they prevented Christians from praying in an unlicensed church.

In June 2009, in Beni Suef, south of Cairo, a woman who was born Christian, converted to Islam to marry a Muslim man, and later reasserted her Christian identity, was charged with forgery for allegedly trying to obtain an identification document indicating one of her children was Christian. A government prosecutor interviewed the woman, declined to press charges, and ordered her release.

In October 2008 security officials in the governorate of Sharqiya arrested Quranist blogger Reda Abdel-Rahman. Police raided Abdel-Rahman's home and confiscated his personal computer, books, CDs, and cassette tapes before taking him to an unknown location. Despite multiple court rulings ordering his release, Abdel-Rahman was held until January 22, 2009. Security officials reportedly subjected him to physical and mental abuse in detention. As of the end of the reporting period, there had been no government response to investigate and potentially prosecute the officials.

In 2008, airport security officials arrested a convert from Islam to Christianity, along with her husband and their two sons, ages two and four, while they were trying to board a flight to Russia. Officials charged her with carrying a false identification document. The convert subsequently told U.S. officials that state security officials raped her multiple times and subjected her to other physical and mental abuse during her detention in January 2009 to pressure her to revert to

Islam. Although her husband and sons were released after four days in custody, she was held until January 22, 2009, when a judge granted bail and ordered her release. Before granting bail, a judge reportedly told her he would have killed her if the law permitted. Upon her release, she was reportedly thrown from a moving vehicle and subsequently went into hiding, where she remained at the end of the reporting period. Two employees of the Coptic Orthodox Patriarchate in Alexandria were arrested on suspicion of providing her forged identity documents.

In October 2008 a male convert from Islam to Christianity claimed that agents of state security had detained him on multiple occasions over several years, including during the reporting period. The convert stated that authorities had subjected him to severe physical and mental abuse; he said the officers called him an "apostate" (murtadd), told him he was suffering as a result of his conversion, and pressured him to revert to Islam. The convert stated that during the reporting period state security officers beat his wife on the abdomen while she was pregnant, causing her to hemorrhage. He also showed officials scars purportedly inflicted by governmental interrogators in previous years, including long scars on his back and sides and numerous deep, circular scars on his shoulder, reportedly caused by state security officers holding burning cigarettes against his flesh for long periods of time.

The government harassed Muslims who held heterodox views including Quranists, Shi'a and Ahmadiya Muslims.

On November 18, 2009, security officials at Cairo International Airport detained Quranist Abdel Latif Said. The government released him, without charges, on November 25. On April 14, 2010, a Cairo Administrative Court ordered the government to lift any travel ban it had imposed on Said. On April 24, 2009, security officials at Cairo International Airport had prevented Said from traveling to the United States to attend a conference. The Quranists are a small group of Muslims that the state considers unorthodox because they view the Qur'an to be the sole authority for Islam and reject the Hadith and other traditional sources of Islamic law.

Beginning on March 15, 2010, government security officials arrested 11 members of the country's Ahmadiya Muslim community; all were subsequently released, with the final six being freed on June 7. The Ahmadiyas were charged with the penal code offence of showing "contempt for religion" and vague emergency law charges of undermining social cohesion but were never prosecuted.

The government took no action to implement a 2008 ruling of the Supreme Court of Administrative Justice that ordered the government to issue national identity documents to 12 converts to Christianity who were originally Christian but had converted to Islam. There were hundreds of pending cases that other such converts have brought with the same request. The ruling, which is not subject to appeal, overturned a 2007 ruling by a lower court that held that the MOI was not obligated to recognize the reconversion to Christianity by Christian-born converts to Islam (see Legal/Policy Framework).

The government took no action during the reporting period to provide Fathy Labib Youssef, another such "reconvert," an identity document indicating that he is Christian. In December 2008 the Alexandria Administrative Court ruled that refusal to issue the identity document was illegal.

In 2007 authorities released five men affiliated with the Quranist movement who had been arrested four months before. One detainee reported to a lawyer representing an independent human rights organization that a state security investigator had beaten him and threatened him with rape. As of the close of the reporting period, there had been no government response to investigate and potentially prosecute the official.

By the end of the reporting period, the government had not prosecuted any of the Bedouin villagers who assaulted the Abu Fana monastery in 2008, nor those who concurrently kidnapped, physically abused, and reportedly attempted forcefully to convert several monks. The armed assault also resulted in the death of one Muslim man, as well as multiple injuries including gunshot wounds to monks and the destruction of the chapel, artifacts, and some of the monks' cells. Three

monks abducted from the monastery were reportedly rescued by security services. Police were reportedly slow to respond to the attack but have maintained a presence on the road leading to the monastery. The NCHR investigated the attack, which according to independent human rights groups originated in a land dispute. On August 20, 2009, the government released, without charges, two Copts arrested in connection with the death of a Muslim villager. Two Muslims detained in connection with the attack were also released on August 20. Reports claimed the two Coptic brothers were being detained to pressure Coptic authorities not to press for official prosecution of the perpetrators. Human rights advocates reported that this incident exemplified an increasingly prevalent pattern of governmental authorities detaining Copts following sectarian attacks and either holding them without charges or threatening false charges and a police record; the detentions serve as a tool to blackmail Coptic authorities to desist from demanding criminal prosecution of the perpetrators and to dissuade the victims and/or their families from seeking recourse in the judicial system for restitution of damages.

Jehovah's Witnesses leadership reported government harassment and interrogation of their members during the reporting period and efforts to induce some into becoming informers. State security officers reportedly threatened several Witnesses that harassment would revert to former elevated levels if they refused to cooperate by providing information such as the identities and activities of fellow adherents, including those who conduct baptisms. Authorities also reportedly confiscated literature and personal Bibles from visiting foreign Witnesses. State security authorities reportedly monitored the homes, telephones, and meeting places of Jehovah's Witnesses. According to senior international Jehovah's Witness leadership, however, there were some improvements, including permission for groups of up to 30 to meet, and a cessation of harassment of Witnesses in Alexandria since 2008. Jehovah's Witnesses have reported varying degrees of harassment and surveillance by government agents since 1960, but senior international Witness leaders believed that their engagement with the government over the past three years concerning their request for official recognition had resulted in diminished harassment and hostile surveillance.

On April 13, 2009, police arrested convert to Christianity Raheal Henen Mussa, reportedly for possession of a false identification document. She was held for four days and then released into the custody of her parents.

On February 1, 2009, police arrested two citizens at the Cairo International Book Fair for distributing Bibles. The men were released after several days.

In 2008 in Al Fayoum, police arrested a woman and two men on suspicion that they had distributed Christian tapes and publications. The three were released one day later without charges.

In 2008, a police officer assigned to guard the Archangel Michael Church in Deshasha, located in the Sumusta district of the governorate of Beni Suef, assaulted three women who were assisting with government-approved renovations. In 2008, police arrested six Copts who also had been assisting with renovations. The Copts were questioned and released. The police officer was also briefly detained on assault charges, but authorities released him with no charges pending.

In 2008 the public prosecutor ordered the release without charges of 25 members of the Islamic Al-Ahbash sect, including three Lebanese and a Kazakh, who had been arrested in 2007 on charges of membership in an illegal organization and contempt for religion. The expatriates were reportedly deported.

In 2007 police detained Siham Ibrahim Muhammad Hassan al-Sharqawi, a Muslim convert to Christianity, on the outskirts of Qena, 300 miles south of Cairo. She had been in hiding since 2003. She was interrogated for four days and released.

In 2007 police rescued Shaimaa Muhammad al-Sayed, a female convert from Islam to Christianity, from assailants who beat her in public; but police arrested her after her father, who was one of the assailants, informed them that she was a convert to Christianity and that he had previously filed a missing persons report on her. She was found to be in possession of a counterfeit identity card listing her religion as Christianity and held on charges of falsifying a government document.

The Office of the Prosecutor General, Supreme State Security Prosecution in Cairo, ordered her release on July 22, 2007, and confiscated both her original identity card and the counterfeit one. According to credible reports, after her release, her father beat her in front of the police station.

An estimated several thousand persons remained imprisoned during the reporting period because of alleged support for or membership in Islamist groups seeking to overthrow the government. The government stated that these persons were in detention because of membership in or activities on behalf of violent extremist groups, without regard to their religious affiliation. Internal security services monitor groups and individuals suspected of involvement in or planning for extremist activity. Internal security agencies regularly detain such persons, and the ongoing state of emergency allows them to renew periods of "administrative detention" indefinitely.

On August 8, 2007, police detained Adel Fawzi Faltas Hanna, a retired doctor and president of the Middle East Christian Association's (MECA) Egyptian branch, and Peter Ezzat Hanna, a photographer for MECA and the Copts United Web site. The government investigated the two men's activities on charges including the denigration of Islam and disturbing the public order. On July 7, 2007, Nader Fawzi, in his capacity as president of MECA, had filed a lawsuit naming the president and five senior ministers as defendants, accusing the government of failing to properly investigate the al-Kosheh incident of January 1-3, 2000, in which 21 Copts were killed, others injured, and Copt properties destroyed. The perpetrators were not brought to justice and no indemnity was paid to the victims or their families. In August 2007 police also raided the Cairo homes of Adel Fawzi and Peter Ezzat and reportedly confiscated several copies of a MECA publication, *The Persecuted: The Story of the Coptic Nation*. On November 4, authorities released Adel Fawzi and Peter Ezzat following three months in detention. On November 5, 2007, authorities arrested three other MECA affiliates under investigation for a variety of alleged offenses, including denigrating Islam. On December 26, 2007, authorities released the three men without charges.

In January 2009 six Christian brothers were sentenced to three years in prison on charges of "resisting arrest" and "assaulting authorities." Christian activists asserted that the brothers were prosecuted for failing to close their café during the Muslim fasting month of Ramadan. Independent human rights groups were unable to link the incident to sectarian motives, noting that other Christian-owned cafés remained open during Ramadan without harassment. Police raided the brothers' café in Port Sa'id in 2008, damaging the café and injuring several of them.

In 2008 the Esna Court sentenced a Coptic shopkeeper to one month in prison for impersonating a police officer and trying to remove the veil of a woman he suspected of shoplifting. After he attempted to stop the woman from fleeing, Muslim assailants attacked Copt-owned properties for which the government ordered the payment of a total of \$230,000 (1.26 million Egyptian pounds) as indemnity to Christian business owners who suffered losses.

In 2008 Giza criminal court sentenced Coptic priest Mita'us Wahba to five years in prison with "forced labor" for officiating at a wedding between a Copt and a Muslim convert to Christianity. The court found Father Wahba criminally liable for accepting an allegedly false identification document the convert presented. Wahba appealed but remained in prison at the end of the reporting period.

In November 2008 authorities released Bahya Nagy Ibrahim when the public prosecutor enjoined the execution of her three-year prison sentence pursuant to her September 2008 conviction on allegations of "knowingly using a false identification document." The charge stemmed from her father's brief conversion to Islam in 1962. She had listed her religion as Christian on her marriage certificate in 1978, not knowing that her father's brief conversion to Islam in 1962 made her official religion Islam, according to the country's interpretation of Islamic law. In November 2007 her sister, Shadia Nagy Ibrahim, was sentenced to three years in prison on allegations of falsely claiming to be Christian, a charge arising from her father's brief conversion to Islam in 1962. The public prosecutor ordered her release in January 2008. The two sisters remained free at the end of the reporting period.

In 2008 the Shubra Criminal Court sentenced three people to three years in prison each for helping a Muslim woman obtain a counterfeit national identity card that indicated her religion as Christian to facilitate her marriage to a Christian. The defendants appealed but were serving their sentences at the end of the reporting period.

In March 2007 the Alexandria Court of Appeal upheld the conviction of 22-year-old student blogger Abdel Karim Nabil Suleiman. In February 2007 the Alexandria Criminal Court convicted him of "denigrating" Islam and insulting the president through his blog entries and sentenced him to four years in prison (three for denigrating Islam and one for insulting the president). In 2006 Alexandria security forces arrested Abdel Karim, whose blog entries had contained strongly worded critiques of the practice of Islam and Al-Azhar's Sunni Muslim orthodoxy. Abdel Karim had previously been detained on account of his writings for 18 days in 2005. He had been expelled and reported to the authorities by Al-Azhar University for criticizing Islamic authority. On December 22, 2010, an appellate court rejected Suleiman's final appeal. He remained in prison at the end of the reporting period.

In April 2009 government security forces demolished a building the Coptic Orthodox Diocese of Marsa Matrouh had recently bought to serve as a parish social services center. According to media reports, security forces claimed a brick fence on the roof of the one-story building exceeded the height approved by local government. At the end of the reporting period, there were no reports of governmental intention to investigate the conduct of the security forces who carried out the demolition.

Following the outbreak of the A/H1N1 influenza virus, initially dubbed "swine flu," the government ordered the culling of the country's estimated 400,000 swine population to begin on May 1, 2009. After the World Health Organization and the Food and Agriculture Organization announced that the slaughter of the animals would have no effect on the circulation of the A/H1N1 virus, the Ministry of Health admitted, according to *Al-Masry Al-Yom* and other newspapers, that the country exploited the international spread of the virus to put an end to what it termed the disorderly and unhygienic raising of pigs in congested urban areas. Ministry of Health spokesman Abdulrahman Shaheen affirmed that the decision to slaughter all the pigs was more to safeguard public health than a precautionary measure in confronting the virus. However some observers identified a sectarian motive for the action. The government's culling of the swine had a severe economic impact on Coptic Christian families who rely on pigs and garbage scavenging for their primary income.

In March 2009, a local council in Maghagha, Minya governorate demolished part of a 10-acre Coptic cemetery, destroying graves.

In 2008 authorities demolished a Coptic social services building owned by the Coptic Church in Alexandria. Local authorities demolished the building because they alleged it had been built without a permit.

Forced Religious Conversion

On March 30, 2010, an administrative court in Alexandria dismissed a lawsuit filed on behalf of two boys born as Coptic Christians seeking recognition of their self-identification as Christians, despite their father's conversion to Islam in 2005. As a result, when the plaintiffs, Andrew and Mario Medhat Ramses, turned 16 in June 2010, they were only eligible to receive national identification cards designating that they are "Muslim." The court's dismissal of the lawsuit supported the discriminatory policy of forcibly changing the religious affiliation of Christian children recorded on official documents when their father converts to Islam. In its opinion, the court stated that Coptic Church-issued documents certifying that the boys were Christian had no legal standing.

In June 2009 the Court of Cassation ruled to grant Kamilia Lotfy, a Coptic Christian, custody of her two sons, overturning a 2008 ruling by the Alexandria Appeals Court that had awarded custody of the twins to their father based upon his conversion to Islam. At the end of the reporting period the boys remained in their mother's custody.

On July 27, 2009, a Cairo family court awarded legal custody of Aser Usama Sabri, whose parents are Baha'is, to the child's Muslim aunt. The ruling, which came in a lawsuit filed by the boy's grandfather, had no immediate practical effect as the boy and his parents live abroad.

In June 2009 the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights (EIPR) referenced a 2007 report by Human Rights Watch which asserted that in 2007 there were 89 cases of Egyptian citizens whose religious affiliation had been changed in official documents to Islam against their will, after their fathers converted to Islam. The 2007 report also asserted that in violation of the law, the MOI refused to change their religious affiliation to Christianity when they reached the age of 15.

As in previous years, there were occasional claims of Muslim men forcing Coptic women and girls to convert to Islam. Reports of such cases were disputed and often included inflammatory allegations and categorical denials of kidnapping and rape. In November 2009 an international Christian advocacy group published a report regarding alleged cases of forced conversion; however, well-respected local human rights groups were unable to verify such cases and found it extremely difficult to determine whether compulsion was used, as most cases involved a female Copt who converted to Islam when she married a male Muslim. Reports of such cases almost never appear in the local media.

Improvements and Positive Developments in Respect for Religious Freedom

In June 2010 the minister of higher education appointed a Copt, law professor Rabeh Rateeb Basta, as vice president for community service and environmental development affairs at Beni Suef University. As noted earlier, Copts are highly underrepresented in leadership positions in public, higher education.

On February 22, 2010, a criminal court convicted and sentenced to life in prison five Muslim men for killing two Christians in the Qena Governorate town of Higaza in April 2009.

Following the attack on Christians in Naga Hammadi in January 2010, the government quickly arrested and began prosecution of four Muslim men implicated in the attack. They were charged with premeditated murder. As of the end of the reporting period, the court had ruled on motions, heard testimony from numerous witnesses, reviewed crime scene data, and was scheduled to resume in September 2010.

Following the Naga Hammadi attack, government officials spoke out strongly against dangers posed by sectarianism and discrimination. For example, on January 21, 2010, President Mubarak stated that in a modern civil state "there is no place for those who would incite sectarianism, or who would differentiate between its Muslim and Coptic citizens." On January 24, speaking at Police Day, President Mubarak said: "terrorism, extremism, and sectarian incitement represent the major challenges to Egypt's national security." On February 28, President Mubarak spoke of the urgent need for efforts by clerics, educational and cultural institutions, publishing houses and the media "to confront the dangers of division, extremism and sectarian incitement." In late January, 2010 the minister of religious endowments sent a group to all governorates in Upper Egypt to engage in a religious awareness campaign and to address Islam's stance on sectarian violence and strife and the dangers they pose to society's stability.

On January 26, 2010, Cairo's Administrative Court rejected a legal challenge filed by private citizens challenging the government's authority to issue identification documents to Baha'is. The government issued birth certificates and national identification documents to some unmarried Baha'is throughout the reporting period.

On April 25, 2010, the ministers of education and Islamic endowments announced reforms of the Islamic education curriculum effective for the 2010-11 academic year. The new curriculum was jointly prepared by Al Azhar and the Ministry of Education and reportedly includes a focus on "morals."

On February 23, 2010, Al Azhar and the Vatican's Joint Committee for Dialogue among the Monotheistic Religions held its annual meeting in Cairo. The dialogue focused on understanding sectarian violence, its causes, and solutions. No resolution or report of findings was issued.

On March 7, 2010, the government completed its 11,428,000 Egyptian pounds (\$2 million) restoration of the Maimonides Synagogue in Cairo.

On May 2, 2010, the religion section of state-owned newspaper *Al-Ahram* began publishing the text of the Coptic Orthodox pope's weekly sermons.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

Violent sectarian attacks on Copts continued during the reporting period, although Christians and Muslims share a common culture and live as neighbors throughout the country. The Naga Hamadi shooting was the deadliest single sectarian attack in a decade, although some estimated that the overall number of attacks fell during the reporting period. There were no instances of deaths from sectarian violence during the last five and one-half months of the reporting period. However, the director of Egyptians Against Religious Discrimination reportedly stated in January 2010 that "I think the sectarian violence, or rather the violent attacks against non-Muslims in Egypt, has been escalating in the past year." The number killed in communal violence remained the same or increased slightly.

On January 6, 2010, in the town of Naga Hammadi, Qena Governorate, three men with automatic weapons shot Coptic churchgoers after Coptic Orthodox Christmas Mass. Seven persons were killed (six Christians and one off-duty Muslim police officer) and 11 others wounded (nine Copts, two Muslims). Four suspects were quickly arrested. At the end of the reporting period, they remained in detention and were being tried before an emergency state security court on charges of premeditated murder. At the end of the reporting period, the court was scheduled to resume in September 2010. At the end of the reporting period, the government had not determined if others were involved in the killings. Following the killings, both Christians and Muslims attacked each other and their properties in Naga Hammadi and surrounding villages, although Christian properties suffered the brunt of the damages. Violence was particularly severe on January 9 in the village of Baghoura, resulting in the death of one Christian woman. Twenty-eight Christians and 14 Muslims were arrested in connection with the violence. All those involved in Baghoura were released in April 2010.

In November 2009, in Farshout, Qena Governorate, accusations that a 20-year-old Coptic man raped a 12-year-old Muslim girl sparked violence by Muslims against the Coptic Christian community specifically targeting Christian-owned homes and businesses. Rioters also attacked a police station where they believed police were holding the alleged rapist. Human rights groups criticized what they characterized as an inadequate police response to the riots. Despite the extensive property damage, no criminal charges were filed against rioters. The alleged rapist's criminal trial was ongoing at the end of the reporting period.

In an incident that also sparked rioting, on October 19, 2009, assailants in the Upper Egyptian town of Deyrout shot and killed Farouk Atallah, a 61-year-old Christian, purportedly because they believed Atallah's son had engaged in an illicit sexual relationship and produced pornographic videos of a relative of theirs, a Muslim girl. Police arrested and charged four Muslims with murder. The arrests incited days of anti-Christian rioting in Deyrout and resulted in extensive damage to Christian property. On February 22, 2010, a court in the city of Assuit acquitted the four. The government did not appeal the acquittal.

On March 13, 2010, in the city of Marsa Matruh, a crowd estimated at 300 Muslims, reportedly encouraged by local imam who, like most imams in the country, receives a salary from the Ministry of Islamic Endowments, attacked Copts, Copt-owned properties, and a Coptic church complex after persons reportedly connected to the church built a wall that blocked

a pathway to a local mosque. According to unconfirmed reports, the imam urged "holy war" against the enemies of Islam and called for the expulsion of "infidels." The attack reportedly resulted in injuries to 19 Christians, four Muslims, and eight policemen who attempted to intervene, and the destruction of nine homes, three shops, a warehouse and 11 automobiles. The Andalus Institute documented that injuries included head wounds, fractured bones, and internal bleeding, resulting in critical injuries to two Copts, and that the attackers used Molotov cocktails, pipes, clubs, stones, and knives. (See Abuses section)

In a report released in April 2010, the Egyptian Initiative for Personal Rights reported significant interreligious violence between January 2008 and January 2010, described the situation as grave, and noted a geographic spread in the violence.

In April 2010 the Egyptian Organization of Human Rights accused author Yusuf Zidan of "blasphemy" for writings contained in his Arabic "Booker" prize-winning novel *Azazil* that are allegedly critical of the Coptic Orthodox Church. The country's public prosecutor announced that it would investigate the allegations.

Muslim convert Muhammad al-Higazy remained out of public view throughout the reporting period, reportedly fearing for his personal security following public death threats he received from his family and societal elements when he sued the government in 2007 to acknowledge his conversion by issuing him identity documents that list his religion as Christianity. Maher al-Gohary, another convert to Christianity who sued for the same right during the reporting period, also claimed to live in hiding and stated that he and his daughter had also received death threats.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy

Religious freedom is an important part of the bilateral dialogue. The right of religious freedom has been raised with senior government officials by all levels of the U.S. government, including members of Congress, the secretary of state, the assistant secretary for near eastern affairs, the assistant secretary for democracy, human rights and labor, the ambassador, and other Department of State and embassy officials. The embassy maintains formal contacts with the Office of Human Rights at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The embassy also regularly discusses religious freedom matters with other government officials, including governors and members of parliament. The ambassador has made public statements supporting religious freedom, interfaith understanding, and efforts toward harmony and equality among citizens of all religious groups. Specifically, the embassy and other Department of State officials raised concerns with the government about the ongoing discrimination that Christians face in building and maintaining church properties despite Decree 291 of 2005; official discrimination against Baha'is; arrests and harassment of Muslim citizens whose religious views deviate from the majority; and the government's treatment of Muslim citizens who wish to convert. During the UN Human Rights Council periodic review of the government's human rights record in February 2010, the U.S. delegation made a number of interventions regarding religious freedom.

U.S. embassy officials maintain an active dialogue with leaders of the Jewish, Christian, Muslim, and Baha'i religious communities, human rights groups, and other activists. U.S. embassy officials investigate complaints of official religious discrimination brought to its attention. They also discuss religious freedom matters with a range of contacts, including academics, businessmen, and citizens outside the capital area. U.S. officials actively challenge anti-Semitic articles in the media through discussions with editors in chief and journalists.

U.S. programs and activities support initiatives in several areas directly related to religious freedom, including funding for programs of the Coptic Evangelical Organization for Social Services that work with Coptic and Muslim community groups, as well as support for NGOs that monitor the country's media for occurrences of sectarian bias.

The U.S. government is working to strengthen civil society, supporting secular channels and the broadening of a civic culture that promotes religious tolerance, and supporting projects that promote tolerance and mutual respect between different religious communities.

The embassy supports the development of educational materials that encourage tolerance, diversity, and understanding of others, in both Arabic-language and English-language curricula.

The embassy facilitated Middle East Peace Initiative (MEPI) grant-making efforts, a number of which promoted religious freedom and interfaith dialogue. For instance, MEPI funded a Christian-Muslim dialogue entitled "Accept Me to Accept You" in Assuit, an area known for communal tensions.

Embassy officials also worked with the Supreme Council of Antiquities to promote the conservation of cultural antiquities, including Islamic, Christian, and Jewish historical sites.

[Back to Top](#)